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The Oxford House Story: An Interview with Paul Molloy

William L. White

Introduction

In the past decade, I have written a great deal about the rise of new recovery support institutions that defy placement in the traditional categories of addiction recovery mutual aid societies or addiction treatment organizations. One of the most successful of these new organizations is the growing network of Oxford Houses and the person who most personifies Oxford House is Paul Molloy. Paul has become a good friend and valued colleague over the years and he was gracious enough to take some time in May 2012 to share with me the history of Oxford House and his thoughts about its future. Please join me in a most engaging tale of recovering people discovering that they could do together what they had not been able to achieve on their own.

Personal History

Bill White: Paul, what I would like to do in this interview is capture the story of Oxford House from its beginnings. Perhaps we could start with how having your personal story intersected with the birth of Oxford House.

Paul Molloy: I was brought up in a small Vermont town just 8 miles south of where Bill Wilson was born and I did not have a drink of alcohol, not even a beer, until I went off to college in 1956. At college, I discovered that alcohol was not quite the evil I thought it was and that I probably wouldn't go to hell if I took a drink. As a matter of fact, I discovered that with more drinks, I was more confident, more able to do all the things that a Vermonter who had become a college debater of considerable skill wanted to do. In those days, the debate program at the University of Vermont was roughly the equivalent of a good football program, but instead of scholarships, we got prize money.

I joined a college fraternity and one day I impressed my fraternity brothers after each of us bought a bottle of vodka. I drank mine by the glassful until I finally collapsed to the floor. Looking back on it, it was good that I vomited so that I didn't die of alcohol poisoning. The only lesson I learned was never to drink vodka again. Even at the height of my drinking, I avoided vodka. I would drink vanilla or crème de menthe or Listerine before I would drink vodka. It was probably the wrong lesson to learn since my drinking progressed. Nonetheless, drinking didn't create a major problem for the next few years.

Jane and I got married while we were both juniors in college. A year later we had our first child and after we graduated, we both went to law school in Washington, D. C. with our daughter in tow. I suspect that I avoided alcohol problems at that time in part because we never had the money to afford a lot of booze.

As time progressed, it became clear that I had gained a great tolerance for the use of alcohol. After we finished law school, Jane and I took some time off while we studied for and passed the bar exam. Shortly thereafter, I landed into a job working on Capitol Hill for Senator Winston Prouty, a Republican Senator from Vermont. As a Congressional staffer, I learned that I could drink many folks under the table. We would be bargaining over legislation involving railroad unions, and the union guys would marvel at the fact that I kept drinking, kept drinking and kept drinking while many of them would fall asleep or eventually give in to whatever issue I was promoting at the moment.

Soon I began to get into trouble because of drinking. One night after some extended drinking at the Carroll Arms, a bar right next to the Old Senate Office Building, I called Secretary of Transportation John Volpe, the former governor of Massachusetts, at his home at the Watergate. The next morning when I came into work, Senator Pastore, a Democratic senator from Rhode Island, was leaving Senator Prouty's office, and I knew that I probably had a problem. When I walked in to Senator Prouty's office, he said, "Get in here. Did you call John Volpe last night at 2:00 a.m. and insult him?" I said, "I might have. I was drinking a lot." Senator Prouty said, "Senator Pastore was just in here. Secretary Volpe called him at 7 a.m. this morning and told him that the Republican Counsel to the Senate Commerce Committee had called him and used ethnic slurs." My response to Senator Prouty was: "I may have a drinking problem and I probably should join AA." He said, "You'll have to do something. I don't know whether Norris Cotton and Hugh Scott [two other senators on the Committee] will allow you to stay on the Committee staff."

So, off I went to AA meetings and every day I would report back to Senator Prouty after a meeting. At the end of 30 days, I explained to the Senator that this had been a wonderful experience for me because I had learned that I had to control my drinking and not drink too much. The Senator said, "Thank God, we've missed you. Come on in and have a drink." I was off and running once again. I should mention that, at that time, it was very common for Congressional members and staff to drink at lunch and in the office, particularly at the end of the day. Most people, however, were more moderate in their use of alcohol than I was.

One of the problems I had was that, as my tolerance increased, I used to drink more and I began to have personality changes – and not for the better. Unfortunately, when I would have a personality change while drinking, I would often be a mean drunk and even tried to kill my wife. By then, we had 5 children. She was a lawyer. I was a lawyer. We were, in many ways, the yuppies of our day. But alcohol was causing serious problems at home and elsewhere.

I should have known that alcohol was causing a problem when not once but twice I picked up the best-looking prostitute on 14th Street and the beautiful girl turned out to be a guy. As a heterosexual guy, I found that sobered me up very quickly – at least for the moment.

In 1971, I left Capitol Hill to begin my own business. But instead of really working at growing my business, I spent my time at the Mayflower Hotel bar waiting for clients to knock on my door or sit on the bar stool next to me. Not surprisingly, little business materialized. Fortunately, in 1972, Jane was awarded a fellowship to Princeton University for a year at the Woodrow Wilson School – and the fellowship included faculty housing for the whole family. So, we packed up and moved to Princeton for a year. Of course, I carried the problem of alcoholism with me to Princeton. The geographic cure didn't work. Looking back on it, I certainly ruined Jane's experience. I was quickly in trouble, fighting with the President of the university and many other people as my behavior as an alcoholic became very unpredictable.

In January 1973, I recall leaving home – running away if you will – to go to New York City to meet a friend of mine at a bar in Penn Station, then taking an Amtrak train to Montreal and getting in trouble with the conductor because I kept asking a nun sitting next to me about her sex life. After ending up in Montreal, with no overcoat and not dressed for the cold weather, I thought better of my adventure and got on a bus and went to my parents' home in Arlington, Vermont.

During that visit, a neighbor, Orlando Cullinan, took me to AA meetings with him. His AA sponsor had been Bill Wilson. When Orlando came to see me the first time, he brought with him the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. He said, "I got a lot out of this book and I have an extra one. Let me leave it with you. Maybe you'll get something out of it. I'm going to a meeting tonight. Would you like to go with me?" It was a soft-sell kind of approach that Orlando used as we went from AA meeting to AA meeting in rural Vermont.

After 3 or 4 weeks, I returned home to my wife and 5 children in Princeton and things went pretty smoothly for the rest of the academic year. I attended a lot of AA meetings but I don't think I was quite ready to really grasp the program. When Jane's year at Princeton was over, we came back to Silver Spring and I became a househusband. I was not a very successful househusband but I did try to keep from drinking. I also started going to see a psychiatrist whose office was across from the zoo on Connecticut Avenue in Washington. I would bring three of our children with me. They'd sit in the psychiatrist's office while I'd spend my 50 minutes with him and then we would go across the street and visit the zoo. The psychiatrist thought I was a manic depressive and that sounded good to me. It was certainly better than being an alcoholic.

I soon again decided that I needed alcohol in order to live and I went back to drinking. In one of my drunken episodes, Jane called the police because I was trying to kill her once again and she got a court commitment order. The police picked me up and took me off to the psychiatric ward at Holy Cross Hospital in Silver Spring. The psych ward was a 30-day facility and, as soon as I got there, I called Edgar Bennett Williams, a famous lawyer in Washington, and said, "I need your help because of what this terrible woman has done to me." He explained that he only practiced in DC and didn't have a license to practice in Maryland but said that he would send a partner out to see me.

His partner, Ed McGrath, came out to visit the psych ward and explained to me that he had been in recovery for 5 years and that, if I would agree to go into treatment for my alcoholism, he would spring me from the psych ward immediately. I explained to Ed that I was not an alcoholic and I was only there because this terrible woman had called the police and had me committed. McGrath explained to me that he had talked with my wife and she had made it clear that she couldn't live with me anymore. The marriage was over as far as she was concerned. I told Ed I should never have married a Protestant (even though she had become a Catholic) and that I just didn't believe in divorce. I further explained that I would be glad to accommodate Jane and move out if she would agree to sleep with me on Thursday nights.

Ed said, "Paul, she's absolutely terrified of you and wants nothing to do with you." And I said, "What is unreasonable about Thursday nights, just one night a week?" He said, "Well, first of all, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery and there's no way that you can make her do that." So I fired Ed and continued to stay the full 30 days at Holy Cross.

At the end of the 30 days, I was moved to the Washington Adventist Hospital psych ward, which had no time limit. In the psych ward, I became a celebrity of sorts because if you're a lawyer in a psych ward you can get a lot of attention. I remember organizing the patients in

order to force the institution to let us watch the 11:00 news. I argued that if we could not watch the 11:00 news, it would clearly be a violation of our civil rights. As I was mobilizing my efforts to extend the 11:00 news to include the Johnny Carson show, I was told that I was being discharged. I explained to them that I was still covered by my wife's Blue Cross/Blue Shield insurance and had 289 more days of coverage but they said to me, "Not here."

And so it was that I ended up on the streets of DC. I hustled Catholic Charities and as many churches as I could find, but there was no place for me to stay and no way that I could go back home. I lived on the streets of DC for several months. Along the way, Catholic Charities stopped giving me money but began to give me a voucher to stay at the Francis Scott Key Hotel, now a dormitory on the George Washington University campus.

One night that I was there, Ed McGrath, the lawyer whom I'd fired months before tracked me down and said, "Jane is going to have you committed at Saint Elizabeth's Hospital because at 4:00 in the morning, you called her and threatened to kill her once again." At that point, I said to McGrath, "I am an alcoholic. I know I am. I need help and I need treatment," and he said to me, "Paul, I just think you're a bastard and I'm not going to help you unless you can go three days without a drink." So I went three days without a drink, called him again, and told him I hadn't had a drink for three days. He then got me into the Quarter Way House, a Montgomery County-run 21 day program in Takoma Park, Maryland – it was sort of a poor man's rehab program.

I stayed at the Quarter Way House for 21 days, then I went to one of the four county-run halfway houses. The halfway house had been a commercial facility and, in one of the big rooms, there were 13 cots and all 13 of us slept there each night. There was another big room that was a living room and there was also a kitchen. The 13 of us lived there with Hank, the cook; Frank, the house manager; and sometimes Charlie, the counselor. None of us had to pay anything to live there. There were three meals served daily and we were expected to do some of the cleaning up after the meals. I remember Frank, the house manager, insisting that we always had to go clockwise with the SOS pad to clean the frying pan. Of course, those of us living there would always go counterclockwise and then say, "Frank, John's going counterclockwise." We enjoyed tormenting Frank in that fashion because we resented his authority over us. In some ways, that resentment against authority was a greater common bond for us than was recovery.

Frank had had a serious alcohol problem and folks in the program had gotten him the job as manager of the halfway house so that he would have a place to live. For the rest of us, there was a time limit of six months. During the first three months I was at the halfway house, 11 people had to leave because their 6-month time limit was up. Ten of those 11 relapsed within 30 days. To jump ahead for a moment, let me note that we kept this in mind when we started the first Oxford House and decided we wouldn't impose arbitrary time limits on residency. We did it solely for selfish reasons because we'd seen our housemates relapse when they had to leave because of a time limit. And none of them had been drinking or using drugs while in residence at the halfway house.

Most mornings, Father Bazán, pastor of St. Camillus Catholic Church, would stop at the halfway house to buy a Coke and inspire the 13 of us to live a day at a time and not drink or use drugs. One morning he came in and several of the fellows said, "You know, Paul isn't going to go to a job interview on Capitol Hill." Father Bazán said to me, "Why not?" I said, "Well, I never circulated my résumé on the House side and I don't know what the job is and I don't have any money for gas in the car and I've decided not to go." He said, "I think you should go" and he gave me \$20 to buy gas for the car. So, off I went for an interview in the Rayburn Office

Building on the House side of Capitol Hill, where I had never worked. The fellow interviewing me was Lou Berry, the Committee Staff Director, and I decided early on that I had to be honest with him. So I said to Lou, "I'm a recovering alcoholic. I've been sober for three months and I'm living in a halfway house." And Lou said, "That's okay. If we decide to hire you, one drink and you're fired." They hired me. I had again lucked into a truly good job and Mollie Brown became my secretary. I mention Mollie Brown because she is still associated with Oxford House. I ended up staying in that job for six years and got a lot accomplished. I even served as a member of Reagan's transition team. Eventually, however, I left the Hill and joined the Washington office of a Chicago law firm, Isham, Lincoln and Beale, where I spent several years prior to devoting all my time to Oxford House. And, as you know, after being divorced for 13 years, Jane and I were remarried in 1988.

The Birth of Oxford House

Bill White: The critical event in the founding of the first Oxford House occurred in 1975. Describe that event.

Paul Molloy: All of us at the halfway house sensed impending tragedy when the county announced in August of 1975 that it was going to close Alpha One, our halfway house. It was one of those economic hard-times decisions. The county was cutting back and they decided that the building could be used for something else so they closed the halfway house. We were told that a few of us might be able to move to one of the other county halfway houses but most of us would have to just move out. The day we heard the news, we went to an AA meeting and, after the meeting, we migrated with other AA members to a coffee shop. We went in with long faces and started to tell the old-timers how unfair the government was. Here we were, trying to get clean and sober, and now the government was against us and Montgomery County was closing the halfway house.

The old-timers in AA listened to us for maybe three minutes and said, "Ah, get off the pity pot. Why don't you guys take it over yourselves?" We said, "We can't. We've got Hank (the cook), Frank (the house manager), and Charlie (the counselor) to pay. We checked it out and found that it cost \$114,000 a year for the county to run Alpha One." And they said, "Well, you can run it yourselves. You're all grown up – cook your own food. You guys can manage your own house. If you really need a counselor, get on the bus and go up to Rockville."

So we went home that night all excited and we called the county and learned, to our surprise, that the county didn't own the building. They were just renting it. They said to us, "The rent on it is \$750 a month and we're sure the landlord would probably rent it to you for the same price." That threw us because we hadn't anticipated having to pay rent. The next night we again went to the coffee shop after the AA meeting with our long faces and the folks in the AA meeting said, "Well, aren't you guys going to do it?" And we said, "No, the damn county doesn't own the building; they just rent it. And the rent is \$750 a month. We don't have \$750." Then a fellow in AA gave us a check for \$750 and said, "Pay me back when you can." And that's how the first Oxford House got going.

Bill White: What were those early days like?

Paul Molloy: We were scared stiff. As I previously mentioned, the first thing we did was eliminate the six-month rule. We decided that each of us could live there as long as we wanted, so long as we didn't drink, didn't use drugs, and paid our equal share of expenses. I, of course, volunteered to pay half the rent since I had a good job on Capitol Hill. But everybody else said, "If we're going to run this as a democracy – one man, one vote –, then we all should pay the same amount. Otherwise, Molloy will want to be the big boss." That principle – that everyone pay an equal share – has continued to this day.

We decided that we needed to get advice from an old-timer in recovery so we invited Orlando Cullinan to visit the house and talk with us about it. Orlando got on a bus in Arlington, Vermont, and came down to Washington, DC and spent a few days with us. That visit gave us a good deal of confidence in what we were doing. When we raised the point that we didn't really trust each other that much, several of the guys said, "Molloy wants to be elected president. He wants to be the big deal." Somebody else said, "No, no, it's John. He wants to do it." Orlando said, "You know, I come from a small town in Vermont and we elect selectmen but have term limits for them. They have to be re-elected every year. Maybe you can have elections but also impose term limits. And so it was that in each Oxford House there are five officers – president, secretary, comptroller, treasurer, and chore coordinator. And each of these elected officials serves in a particular office for only six months. Then there has to be another election. In houses with only a few members, all or most all residents are elected to one of the offices, but none can hold the same office for more than six months at a time. That principle came from the notion that we could put up with any of us for six months and that, by limiting terms to no more than six months, we could discourage "bossism."

It also became clear that we needed to have a written manual that would lay out how we were going to operate. And that's where Mollie Brown came in because I would write out things and other guys in the house would suggest things and I'd bring it in to Mollie to type. Keep in mind that those were the days of typewriters, not computers so making changes was more difficult and time-consuming. I would bring the changed version home to the Oxford House at night and the guys would talk about it and we'd make more changes and we'd argue over it and then I'd again bring it to Mollie to type again. About the fourth time that Mollie typed it up, I said to her, "Why don't you come out and spend a little time at the Oxford House tonight so that you can get all the changes from the guys so that you won't have to keep re-typing this?"

So Mollie came with me to the Oxford House. I said to everyone, "Now, here's the woman who's typing this. Does anybody have any changes?" Nobody had any changes. I should also note that the Oxford House manual is substantially the same today as it was in 1975 when it was first written. People will read it and notice that we have only nine traditions although other things tend to parallel AA. We only have nine traditions because that's how many we'd gotten to when everyone agreed that there were no more changes. None of us wanted to rock the boat. I'm sure that if we had gone through more iterations of the manual that we might have eventually had 12 traditions, just like AA and NA, but we never made it to that.

Oxford House Expansion

Bill White: How did the process of expanding Oxford Houses unfold?

Paul Molloy: That happened pretty quickly. After we got the first Oxford House going and were running it ourselves, we began to feel guilty because there were a lot of people who came to us and said, "We'd like to live there," but there was no room at the house. When we had initially decided the amount each of us would pay to cover rent and household expenses, we decided that each of us would pay \$25 a week. One of the guys in the house, Ed Case, had been elected Treasurer and in one of the early meetings, he said, "You know, when somebody leaves the house in the middle of the week, it's hard to figure out exactly how much we owe him in unused rent. If we would change it to \$35 a week that would be \$5 a day and that would make it much easier to figure." And I must say, perhaps because of brain damage from alcoholism, we unanimously voted to raise our weekly share to \$35 so that it would be easier for Ed to figure. And because we did that, we accumulated a little extra money in the bank.

After 3 months, we had more than \$1,200 extra in our checking account. Several of us – John O'Neill, Jim Spellman and I – decided we should think about renting a second house. John was given the job of looking in the newspaper to find an available house and he found a house at 44th and Fessenden Street in Northwest Washington. We went to look at it and rented it. That became the second house. That house only lasted for a year, in part because it had eight men living in it and only one bathroom. Furthermore, the landlord lived in a dirt-floored cellar in the house and tended to ride his motorcycle around the house at 7 a.m. every morning. Round and round and round. So, after a year, the men living in that house decided they wanted to rent another house and they did. Technically, that was the first expansion of Oxford House. The Fessenden group then moved to a house at Huntington and Connecticut Avenue Northwest.

Few of us in those early days would have ever dreamed that there would be 1,577 houses in 2012 in the United States and in addition to that that there'd be 30-some houses in Canada, eight in Australia, two in Ghana, and one in Great Britain. Earlier this year, Jane and I traveled to Chile where I sat on an expert panel considering recovery housing. Other countries have also expressed interest.

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988

Bill White: To what do you attribute this growth?

Paul Molloy: It expanded partly because the basic model worked and partly because of some fortuitous events that fostered its growth. I left the Hill in 1981 and joined a law firm in 1981 but, because I'd been open about my own alcoholism and about Oxford House while I'd worked on the Hill, many Congressmen knew me and knew about Oxford House. My openness helped.

In 1986 costs associated with alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness were very high. Most insurance companies were limiting what they would pay but in the 70s, insurance companies had paid an arm and a leg and found that people would just be recycled—into treatment, out of treatment, into treatment again, out of treatment. The constant relapsing was something that large self-insurers like General Motors were reluctant to support. Likewise, the railroad industry had become reluctant to continue to pay for repeated recycling in and out of treatment. Jim Florio, a Congressman from New Jersey, was on the Energy and Commerce Committee and he was looking at health insurance costs. He held a hearing and invited testimony from Oxford House representatives. Three of the 13 folks living in those first Oxford Houses, along with Susan Giovanni, Carlton Brown, and one other fellow, testified at the hearing about how Oxford Houses worked.

The Florio hearing was televised on C-Span and, shortly after Thanksgiving in 1987, I got a call from an Assistant U.S. Attorney in Kansas City, Missouri who had seen a C-Span rerun of the hearing. Kansas City had established a drug task force and he asked me to come to meet with the task force. I mentioned that we would need some financial support if we were to send someone to Kansas City to start houses and they came up with a \$25,000 grant for us to start houses there.

In 1988, Ed Madigan, a Congressman from Illinois, called me to say that Henry Waxman, Chairman of a House Subcommittee, and he were working on a piece of legislation that had originated in the Senate called "The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988." Mr. Madigan said, "Are you still working with Oxford House?" I explained that I was. He said that he'd like to put a little money into the Act so that he could get Oxford Houses going in Lincoln, Illinois in his district. I said, "Well, I'll have to talk to the Board of Directors." The Board of Directors of Oxford House at that time was made up of the presidents of each of the Oxford Houses. In 1988, there were 13 Oxford Houses, almost all of them in the DC area. I went to the board of 13 Presidents and told them of Madigan's proposition. Unanimously they said, "Paul, you're going to screw this up by getting the government involved." So I called Mr. Madigan and said, "You know, I've created a bunch of Black Barry Goldwaters (8 of the 13 presidents were African-American). They don't want anything to do with government so, thanks, but no thanks."

Mr. Madigan told Ronald Reagan the story about Oxford House and Reagan's comment was, "Golly gee, does Nancy know about this?" As soon as she heard about it, she asked Dr. Ian McDonald, a drug expert working in the Reagan White House, to visit an Oxford House. In August of 1988, he visited Oxford House Northampton. First, he asked the residents if they wouldn't like a little federal aid to get more houses. And they said, "No, Paul Molloy's going to screw this up by getting the government involved." So the next thing McDonald asked them was, "When did you last have a vacancy?" And they explained they'd had a vacancy in March. And he asked, "How many people applied for the vacancy?" The folks in the house told him, "23 or 24." He said, "Well, what happened to the others that didn't get accepted?" They said, "We have no idea. We only had one vacancy. One guy came and he's been here ever since." So McDonald said to them, "I thought the way this operated is when you fill one house, half a dozen of you would go and rent another house. That way you would expand the number of Oxford Houses." And they said, "Yes, but it takes us about 2 years to save \$5,000, the amount needed to rent a house in this neighborhood. McDonald then said, "Well, what if there was a little revolving loan fund? Would you guys use the loan fund for the increased number of houses?" And there seemed to be a consensus that as long as it would be a loan fund, it would probably be okay."

It was from that idea that the 1988 Anti-Drug Abuse Act included a provision that required states that received federal block grants for alcoholism, drug addiction, or mental illness to set up a \$100,000 revolving loan fund through which groups of 6 or more recovering people could borrow up to \$4,000 to rent a house. Section 2056 of the law spelled out the exact same criteria found in the Oxford House model. That was a significant catalyst for expansion.

The Act got the attention of the states. In 1988, four state Directors of alcohol and drug agencies were in recovery themselves and they were the ones most interested in supporting the Oxford House concept and encouraging the development of Oxford Houses in their states. They understood the value of "letting the inmates run the asylum." However, those who were professionals in the field but not in recovery doubted very much that recovering alcoholics and

drug addicts could manage such an enterprise, and many were very reluctant to start the program in their states.

Shortly after enactment of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1988, I got a call from a fellow from New Jersey who was on the Governor's Commission and had been one of the founders of NASADAD (National Association of State Alcohol/Drug Abuse Directors). It was Riley Regan and he asked, "Are you the Paul Molloy who lived at Fiddler Lane, that first Oxford House in Silver Spring back in the 70s?" I assured him that I was the same person. I had first run into Riley in 1975 when Riley was with Montgomery County and had gotten a lot of feedback from the three existing regular halfway houses in the county that this new Oxford House was a firetrap and that it was in trouble. One after another the fire inspectors and the environmental people would come to the Oxford House. Finally, Riley came to visit the house; he was enthralled and totally loved the idea that the 13 of us were living together and throwing out anyone who drank or used drugs and that we were sharing expenses. So, he went back and said, "Leave those guys alone. If they don't do anything else other than get themselves clean and sober, they're not harming anybody." And so he was our savior at that point.

Riley asked whether I was responsible for the loan fund provision in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act and said, "All my buddies at NASADAD want to get Congress to repeal this mandate." I told him the story of how the provision came about. I also mentioned that, as a Republican, I was against mandates and told him that it had become a mandate only because Chairman John Dingle of the House Energy and Commerce Committee had said, "Unless you make it a mandate, the states won't pay any attention." "Well," Riley said, "I'm going to tell my friends who are members of NASADAD to lay off and give this thing a chance."

Riley also said that he'd like to try some Oxford Houses in New Jersey and asked me to come up and talk about doing so. So we got into the car and went to New Jersey. By that time, the Washington Post had taken interest in doing an article. They assigned Peter Carlson to do an article which ran in the Sunday Magazine -- it's on the Oxford House website at www.oxfordhouse.org under "Publications." It was a good article and it talked about our going up to New Jersey to talk to Riley and his people about Oxford House. We said we would be willing to give a helping hand but we needed some money to do so because we would have to take somebody who'd lived in an Oxford House, teach them how to find another house, and send them to New Jersey. Riley agreed and got us a \$40,000 grant. We soon began opening Oxford Houses in New Jersey.

Another catalyst for expansion was the appearance in 1991 of a very favorable story about Oxford House on the CBS television program, *60 Minutes*. Here's how that came about. My friend Maurice Rosenblatt called me one morning in January 1991 and asked me to join him and Eric Sevareid, the distinguished CBS journalist, for lunch at the COSMOS Club – a hundred year old private social club in Washington, D.C. for men (and for women beginning in 1988) distinguished in science, literature and the arts. During the lunch, Maurice, Eric and I "solved" all the major issues facing the world. At the end of lunch over our second cup of coffee, Maurice said, "Paul, tell Eric about Oxford House." I did and as I finished, Sevareid, in his deep authoritative voice, said, "Maurice, that is the missing link. You know my first wife was an alcoholic and I sent her to treatment a dozen times. Each time she came home she would only stay sober a few weeks and soon she would again have to go into treatment."

Within a few days, I got a call from a producer at CBS *60 Minutes* asking if they could do a segment about Oxford House. I explained I would have to clear it with the houses but thought it was a wonderful idea. When I approached the house members and alumni, some had

reservations. We had kept a low pretty low profile up to that time. We had modeled ourselves on Alcoholics Anonymous. Moreover, we knew that AA had experienced some bad publicity in its early days as self-promoters in the program had sought publicity and had then returned to drinking. Within a few weeks, however, a majority of the houses agreed that Oxford House was secure enough to weather any storm that might follow such publicity. They also agreed that each of the approximately 200 houses could decide whether or not to participate if asked. Ultimately, most houses were willing to share their experiences for the purpose of encouraging the expansion of the network of Oxford Houses.

The *60 Minutes* program aired May 5, 1991 on the CBS network. Thousands of phone calls followed the broadcast. A number of Oxford House residents manned the phones and did the best they could to answer questions from relatives of alcoholics and drug addicts and some addicts themselves. Most callers wanted to know how to start an Oxford House or how family members could get in one. One call was different. It came from Leonard Jason, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago. Dr. Jason had lots of questions about Oxford House and expressed his interest in how communities are formed to serve various mutual needs. Specifically, he asked if the men and women in Oxford Houses would be willing to participate in scientific studies to better understand the process of long-term recovery. His field of psychology was community psychology, and he was curious about Oxford Houses as a result of his viewing of the *60 Minutes* program. Within weeks, Dr. Jason and his colleagues were visiting Oxford Houses and learning a lot about the program. This led to the beginning of what is now a substantial body of independent academic research on the Oxford House program and its residents.

Andrea, Ilona, Mark, Steve, and all the other Oxford House residents and alumni who had made it into the 10-minute program segment were hailed as TV stars at AA and NA meetings throughout the DC area. Forty-three residents and alumni appeared in the segment albeit some had only cameo appearances. Before the program was filmed, everyone feared the worst – immediate relapse by the participants following the airing of the program, thereby giving Oxford House a black eye. That did not happen.

Copies of the Oxford House *60 Minutes* segment DVD are in all Oxford Houses. Each of the 1,579 Oxford Houses play it so much for new house members that most Oxford House residents learn the lines in the program by heart. If “Play it again, Sam” is the most quoted line from Casablanca, Andrea saying, “Do you know who I am?” when her house colleagues voted her treasurer of the house is probably the most quoted line from the Oxford House *60 Minutes* segment.

Oxford House has also been helped by many others who have spread the word about the program. I would be remiss if I did not also emphasize the very positive impact that your discussion of Oxford House in your book, *Slaying the Dragon*, has had.

Of course, expansion happened not because of the *60 Minutes* exposure or other publicity but because the concept and system of operation underlying Oxford House produces results. It works. The results are tangible on a case-by-case basis. The following hypothetical describes a typical sequence of events. Let’s assume that John has been accepted into an Oxford House. Initially he doesn’t drink or use drugs because he is fearful that he will be caught and expelled from the house by his peers. Initially he “plays the game” because his peers pressure him to participate in house meetings and house affairs. Soon a vacancy in the house occurs and John is asked to vote on whether or not the group should accept a new applicant. John will probably try to avoid making a decision. “You guys decide,” he will say. “I am new. You fellows know

best.” His roommates will not let him avoid making a decision. “Everyone has to vote,” they will tell him. In Oxford House, everyone participates. Reluctantly John will vote “yes” and at that moment, he begins to assume the role of being a role model. He now will postpone taking a drink or using a drug both because he doesn’t want to be thrown out and have to find another place to live, and also because he doesn’t want to set a bad example for the new guy he just voted into the house. This process of being sucked into a mutually dependent group will go on and on. Each new person voted in and each decision John makes on ordinary house matters will lay a stronger foundation from which to develop such comfortable sobriety that a return to active drug use becomes unlikely. Slowly, but surely, the new habit of sobriety without relapse is setting in. The hidden power of peer support promoting good habits will become the sure path to long-term recovery.

The reason we know that it works is because of the research that has been done. Dr. Jason’s early interest in Oxford House as a result of the *60 Minutes* program has continued year in and year out and he and his group have produced many peer-reviewed studies, much of which has been funded by NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse) and NIAAA (National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse).

Confronting NIMBY

Bill White: Were there problems locating Oxford Houses in those days?

Paul Molloy: Yes, we had trouble renting houses, and we encountered zoning problems. One example was when we started opening houses in Kansas City. I had sent Nkosi Haleem to open houses there. I would call Nkosi several times a day and I’d set up the ground rules for how to find a house. First, he had to be honest about the fact that the house was for a group of recovering alcoholics and drug addicts. Second, it had to be rented at fair market value. Third, the lease from the landlord had to be for at least two years because if we were going to loan the house start-up money, we wanted to make sure it would be around for at least two years in order to get the money paid back. So Nkosi would call me day after day and say that he had no luck. One day, he called me and said he was getting lots of rejections. He said he didn’t know whether the rejections were because he told them it was to be a residence for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts or because he was African-American.

When I was in Kansas City sometime earlier, I had met Dennis, an FBI agent who was in recovery and had been in AA for 25 years. Dennis had said he would be willing to help us any way he could. So one day when Nkosi called me and reported he had gone to the house and the landlords had said that it wasn’t for rent, I called Dennis and asked for his help. That afternoon, Dennis and Nkosi went back to the house on Harrison Street. Dennis told them who he was and that he worked for the FBI and said that they wanted to rent the house. And with that, the house was rented and became the first Oxford House in Kansas City. It also became a lesson to us that we sometimes had to be persistent and we often had to use creativity in order to get the job done.

Bill White: Could you describe how you responded legally to challenges faced by new Oxford Houses?

Paul Molloy: I knew from the beginning that I would need help from other lawyers. We discovered that Steve Polin, one of the guys living in an Oxford House, had gone through law

school, passed the bar, but was then arrested for distributing cocaine and ended up in an Oxford House after he was released from prison. So I talked to him and hired him. He retook the exam, passed, and was admitted to the bar. He still works for us now as a part-time consultant under different terms, but for three years he worked for us full time and became an expert on handicapped individuals and zoning laws. We began to win cases—nearly every one that we fought—and at one point, we were in more than 20 Federal Court jurisdictions. Not even IBM gets entangled like that. Over the years we have been fortunate to get litigation help from many lawyers in the private bar, in the Justice Department, in HUD, and from organizations including the ACLU, the Bazelon Mental Health Center, and the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights.

Bill White: Describe how these legal cases originated.

Paul Molloy: We never asked permission before we moved in. We simply rented a house and moved in, just like an ordinary family. When a town would respond by putting fines on our landlord for violating local zoning, we would go to Federal Court and ask for a temporary restraining order and also ask the court to order the city to make a reasonable accommodation. The reasonable accommodation would be based on the fact that recovering individuals had a better chance of recovery if they lived together and helped each other stay clean and sober. We had taken the principles and the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous, applied it to the Oxford House model of living together and keeping the place alcohol- and drug-free, and we were pretty successful at doing that. Jurisdiction after jurisdiction would argue that alcoholics and drug addicts were not really handicapped and that we were misusing the law, but we always prevailed.

We were fortunate, first of all, that the Federal Fair Housing Act had been amended in 1988 to expand the protection against discrimination to handicapped individuals. In brief, this required localities to make a “reasonable accommodation” for handicapped individuals. Since I believe that alcoholism and drug addiction are diseases, I believe that such individuals fall within the definition of “handicapped” under the Act. As we began expansion, this concept was just a theory and required a good deal of litigation until the U. S. Supreme Court agreed with this position in a case involving Oxford House.

Bill White: Talk about some of the legal cases.

Paul Molloy: We've had a lot of them. In New Jersey, the going got tough early on. We rented a house in Plainfield, New Jersey. I got a call on a Friday from a man who was living in the Plainfield Oxford House who told me that the city had served them with papers that said they had to abandon the house no later than the following Tuesday. Furthermore, the city was going to the state court in Elizabeth, on Monday to seek an injunction and a court order forcing us out. I said that I'd come up on Amtrak Monday morning. When I arrived and got to the courthouse, the trial had already started. The six guys from the Oxford House in Plainfield were sitting in the front pew at the courthouse. I walked up front and said, “Your Honor, my name's Paul Molloy and I'm with Oxford House.” He said, “Are you a lawyer?” and I said, “Yes, but I'm not licensed to practice in New Jersey.” He said, “Well, sit down then and be quiet.” About the fourth time I got up, the judge had the marshal arrest me. Then I said to the fellows from the Oxford House, “Call Riley.” They called Riley and the next morning while we were bringing an action in Federal Court to stop the state court, the judge recused himself from the case. A couple years

ago, Riley was speaking at an Oxford House Convention and mentioned that he had called the judge and reaffirmed that he was in support of Oxford House and the judge had backed off. It was sort of a first lesson of how politics sometimes get involved in litigation. With other situations we faced in New Jersey, some resolved themselves quickly and some did not.

In Cherry Hill, we rented a house and then-Governor Florio called me and said he was very supportive of Oxford House but would I please go talk to the Mayor in Cherry Hill because she is really up in arms over this house. I did so and she asked: "Why in heaven's name would you pick Cherry Hill to rent a house to be an Oxford House?" I explained that, driving up the New Jersey turnpike, there's a big water tower that says, "Cherry Hill welcomes you" and I took it at face value. She wasn't very amused but the court eventually held that we had a right to be in Cherry Hill because recovering alcoholics and drug addicts are considered handicapped under the Federal Fair Housing Act Amendments.

In 1988, the same year that the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed, the Federal Fair Housing Act had been amended. The Federal Fair Housing Act had first been passed in 1964 but its effectiveness had been limited. While it prohibited discrimination in the sale and rental of housing on the base of race, color or creed, each person who was discriminated against had to pursue that matter himself or herself. That wasn't a very effective remedy. In 1988, the law was strengthened to require the Department of Housing and Urban Development to begin investigations upon the allegation of any discrimination and it gave the Justice Department the right to go in on behalf of those who were being discriminated against.

In Audubon, New Jersey, we rented a house and moved 8 African-American women from Camden into the house. After the residents were subject to considerable harassment by the town and its citizens and following a public hearing, we contacted the Justice Department and Justice joined us in defending this and other cases. The Audubon case was in Federal Court for roughly 2-1/2 years with the depositions and the discovery that was involved. At the end of 2-1/2 years, the judge decided in our favor and insisted that each of the women get \$5,000 for the inconvenience and hardship caused by the jurisdiction. Every one of the women took the money and relapsed, even though they had stayed clean and sober for 2-1/2 years. A lesson was learned. We are now careful to tell judges not to give Oxford House or Oxford House residents any money and to just pay the attorneys' fees as the law requires. All we want is the right to live in any neighborhood just like an ordinary family.

At one point, there were lots of Oxford House cases in Federal Courts all across the country, including one in the city of Edmunds, Washington. The Ninth Circuit affirmed a lower court decision that held that 11 men had the right to be living in a house in the city of Edmunds, Washington. The landlord of the house, a fellow who had been in the Marine Corps and had worked in the Nixon White House as part of the Marine Band, had given music lessons to neighbors of the house but he lived in another house in Edmunds. Many of the neighbors pulled their children out of his music lessons because he and his wife were renting this house as an Oxford House. After the Ninth Circuit made its decision, the Supreme Court granted certiorari to hear the case (*City of Edmunds, Washington v. Oxford House, Inc.*, 514 U. S. 1776 (1995)). The issue was whether or not the Federal Fair Housing Act considered recovering alcoholics and drug addicts to be included within the scope of the term "handicapped" under the provisions of the Act. The Supreme Court decided in favor of Oxford House. That case has been very significant, and it has made a difference to Oxford House's expansion.

However, the problem with "not in my backyard" did not go away. Cities used other means to try to prevent Oxford House from locating in good neighborhoods. For example, two

days after 9/11, there wasn't an airplane flying in the country and we had a case scheduled for Federal Court in Waterbury, Connecticut. We called the court, noting that there were no airplanes flying, that the country had just been attacked, and asked if there couldn't be a continuance in this case. The judge said, "Absolutely not. We can't let these terrorists dictate when Federal Courts will meet. The case will go forward on 9-13." And so it was that Steve Polin and I left Washington and drove up the New Jersey Turnpike and up to Palisades Parkway, where, looking across to New York City, we could see the buildings still smoldering. We arrived in Waterbury, Connecticut on the evening of September 12th, ready for trial to begin on September 13th.

One of our witnesses scheduled to testify about the need for making reasonable accommodation and the benefits of recovering alcoholics and drug addicts living together, helping each other stay clean and sober was Riley Regan. Riley was then living in Indiana. Since no planes were flying, Riley drove from Indiana to Waterbury in his little Geo. On the morning of 9-13 as the trial began, I looked around the courtroom and counted 14 lawyers – not only our lawyers but lawyers representing the state of Connecticut, and the Fire Marshal of the state of Connecticut, the city of New Haven, Fire Marshal for the City of New Haven. All the argument was over whether or not seven individuals could live in a house in West Haven, Connecticut without a sprinkler system. There was no requirement that houses rented to families had to have sprinkler systems but here, the state, the city, and the county were arguing that, since this was a house for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts, there needed to be a sprinkler system.

Fortunately, the judge, who formerly sat on the Second Circuit and had reached senior status, wrote a lengthy opinion upholding the right under the Federal Fair Housing Act for a group of individuals living together to expect to be treated exactly the same as a family. He also found that the discrimination against them was very severe and that this discriminatory behavior was so great that treble damages should be paid. The Second Circuit overruled the treble damages part of the case but it upheld the point that every single jurisdiction has to treat Oxford House groups exactly the same as a family renting a house would be treated.

These are just a few examples of the many cases in which we have prevailed. Oxford House is fortunate in that many of its members are lawyers in recovery and willing to take the time and effort to pursue all the cases that have paved the way for the existence of Oxford Houses in 44 of the 50 states. And, as noted previously, we have had legal help from a variety of public and private sources.

Bill White: Aside from the legal problems, what does it take to open an Oxford House?

Paul Molloy: The formula for opening Oxford Houses has become pretty cookie-cutter. We've discovered three things are needed: a start-up loan fund, trained outreach workers, and a philosophy of tough love. A loan fund permits a house to get a start-up loan to pay the first month's rent and the security deposit, then the house pay it back over time. Oxford Houses don't start by themselves; we use trained workers to start them and teach newcomers the system of operations. Outreach workers start houses but they aren't house managers – all Oxford Houses are autonomous – but they serve a critical role in teaching the system and passing along their experience. The philosophy of tough love is the third item – Oxford House does not tolerate any use of alcohol or drugs by residents. Oxford House truly believes that relapse is not part of the disease and can be avoided. Much of the Oxford House program is modeled on AA – and has

been called “AA in a house” – but the more complex structure of Oxford House requires that it take a tougher stance on relapse than does AA. There’s a saying in AA that all you need to start a new meeting is two individuals with resentment and a coffeepot. Living together in an Oxford House involves a lot more social interaction. Residents have to put up with each person day in and day out. In an AA meeting, if somebody shows up drunk, as long as they don’t create a disturbance, they can stay at the meeting. Then, after the meeting, members explain to the individual that the program really works best if you don’t drink and that he or she should try to come sober the next time. In an Oxford House, one relapse results in an expulsion and it has to result in an expulsion because if that didn’t happen, suddenly there would be two or more people drinking and it would become a “drunk house” instead of a “sober house.” And so there’s a distinct difference. It’s a philosophy of tough love, a philosophy of having to follow distinct rules.

OH Administrative Structure

Bill White: Paul, could you describe the administrative structure and staffing pattern of Oxford House?

Paul Molloy: In the beginning, Oxford House had no need for an umbrella organization. Each house was self-run and self-supported. We quickly developed a process within each house by which officers were elected. In many ways, it was similar to a cross between a fraternity house and a New England town meeting.

From 1975 to 1988, there were only 13 Oxford Houses. The Oxford House Board, which came about because we incorporated to give ourselves some confidence, was made up of the Presidents of each of the 13 houses. The Board would change every 6 months because of the ongoing elections in each house. The only central office we had was in my basement, and the only help we had was provided by Mollie Brown, who was donating her time.

We learned quickly that we had to have some kind of office in order to provide charters for these houses that were starting. We already had used the charter mechanism for houses in the Washington, DC area. The Oxford House Board would permit a new group to call itself an Oxford House if three conditions were met: (1) the house had to be democratically self-run; (2) the house had to be financially self-supporting; and (3) each group had to agree to throw out anybody who went back to drinking or using drugs. Those were the three simple rules and they are still the same today. And we still use the same charter mechanism that we developed early on. But as new houses were opened in New Jersey, Kansas City, and Washington State, we decided that the initial charter would be a temporary 6-month charter and during that time, the new group was asked to send us proof that they’d opened a checking account at the bank and that they had an FEIN number. Once a house demonstrates that it understands the Oxford House system of operations, it is granted a permanent charter with the same three conditions. And that’s also what we do with every house. The application for a permanent charter requires that the House get two people from AA to send us a letter recommending that the group receive a permanent charter. We then call those people in AA and say, “Thank you. We’re going to follow your advice and if you ever think there’s any drinking or drug use going on in the house, call us at our toll free number.” Bill Wilson’s probably turning in his grave up there at East Dorset. We’ve created a bunch of potential whistle blowers.

About that time we decided that we had to seek tax-exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Fortunately for us, at about the same time, Wilbur Mills had left the Hill and his former Chief Tax Counsel, Bob Casey, took on the task of getting us the 501(c)(3) certification. It took just three weeks – who you know sometimes really matters.

Bill White: How much has the Oxford House staff expanded since the early days?

Paul Molloy: Today, in 2012, we have 73 people on payroll, which is a pretty big staff. Most of those people are outreach people in the field who start new houses, teach new residents the system of operations and help existing houses that seek their assistance. They are NOT house managers – all Oxford Houses are autonomous and self-governing. Our administrative staff is housed in what we call our World Services Office, which serves as an umbrella organization over the network of autonomous houses. In that office, we have Darryl, our receptionist, who has been with us for ten years. Leann Watkins is also a receptionist and handles a lot of our financial records. Debbie's primary job is to monitor the loan funds. We manage the start-up loan money from about ten or 12 states and we make the start-up loans to groups starting a house. The loan amount is usually \$4,000 and then we collect repayment of that loan at \$170 a month for 24 months until it's paid back. Repayments go back into the loan fund from which it originated and are used for subsequent loans. Keeping all of this pulled together is our Chief Operating Officer, Kathleen Gibson. We've got the technical operation simplified and standardized. Our administrative overhead is less than 7%. We are very proud of the fact that we operate a pretty large-scale program on a really bare-bones budget. We are open about our finances and our annual financial statements are published on our website.

Bill White: Describe the role of those working in Outreach.

Paul Molloy: There are now more than 50 outreach workers. Outreach workers are individuals who are residents or alumni of an Oxford House and who are trained and supervised by Oxford House World Services and paid modest salaries. The experience of having lived in an Oxford House is valuable for three reasons: (1) the individual has picked up some understanding of the policies and procedures used to make a house function, (2) the individual has been part of the group dynamic and understands the living together issues that can arise, and (3) newcomers give the outreach worker respect and creditability because of his or her experience. Unfortunately, just being in recovery or having 12-step program experience is seldom sufficient for starting a new Oxford House.

The Oxford House Manual[©] – first written within weeks of the establishment of the first house in 1975 – continues to be the basic blueprint for all Oxford House processes and procedures and a primary role of the Oxford House outreach worker is to make sure that residents of new houses are familiar with the Manual. It sets forth the election of officers, their duties and the process and procedures for the regular weekly meeting of the house. Each Oxford House follows the exact same time-tested procedures including weekly business meetings and use of standard procedures and forms. This standardization seems to produce uniformly good results but requires either an outreach worker or experienced members of other local houses to teach the residents of a new house the standard system of operations.

I also want to emphasize again that outreach workers are not house managers. All Oxford Houses are autonomous and self-governed. However, outreach workers serve an

invaluable role as mentors and role models to house residents. Of the 167 individuals who have had outreach jobs since we started expansion, only two have relapsed, which is amazing.

Bill White: Oxford House has long encouraged research. How did that come about?

Paul Molloy: The men in the first few Oxford Houses were convinced that their organized use of peer support by living together using disciplined democracy to run their own sober house was a breakthrough in making recovery without relapse the norm rather than the exception. They were convinced that by being able to live in the house for as long as they paid their equal share of expenses and avoided using drugs or alcohol they could master sobriety without relapse. When William Spillaine, Ph.D., who had worked for Robert DuPont, M. D, the initial Director of NIDA, before retiring to teach in the School of Social Service at Catholic University, asked in 1988 to study recovery outcomes for everyone who had lived in Oxford Houses since its beginning, the residents readily agreed. Spillaine tracked down 1,280 former residents and concluded that 80% had stayed clean and sober without relapse.

That was the beginning of multiple third-party studies of the recovery process among Oxford House residents and alumni. Researchers at DePaul University in Chicago have published more than 165 peer-reviewed articles about the recovery process based on data from Oxford House residents and alumni. One of their studies followed 890 people for 27 months who lived in 219 Oxford Houses across the country. They found only 13% of those 890 people relapsed, which is absolutely remarkable. They also did a controlled study where they took 150 people out of a treatment place in the Chicago area and separated half of them—75 went to Oxford House, 75 went where they normally would go. What they found was that 69% of those who went to Oxford House stayed clean and sober versus 33% of the comparison group.

In 2008, Jeffrey D. Roth MD, FASAM, a Chicago addictions psychiatrist who edits the *Journal of Groups in Addiction and Recovery*, wrote: “While research on AA has been limited by the role of anonymity in recovery, the willingness of the Oxford Houses to open their doors to academic research gives us an opportunity to see recovery from addiction in action.”

Present and Future

Bill White: Could you describe the current status of Oxford House and talk about your vision for its future?

Paul Molloy: The good news is that as of mid-2012, there are 1,579 Oxford Houses having 12,505 recovery beds. That is a long way from the 13 Oxford Houses located in the DC area in 1988. However, even with an annual turnover rate of 2.1, the Oxford House recovery bed inventory serves only about 26,000 recovering individuals each year or only a small percentage of the number who would benefit from living in an Oxford House. According to the federal government, about 2.3 million of the 25 million with an addiction to alcohol and/or other drugs received treatment last year – less than one in ten. Of those in formal treatment, 60% had been in treatment at least three times before their present treatment episode. Cycling in and out of treatment is the norm. Neither afflicted individuals nor society at large can afford that kind of inefficiency.

Many jurisdictions are discouraged by the high cost of treatment – particularly when recidivism is so high. Oxford House is an exception. Oxford House, Inc. – the national umbrella

non-profit – operated with a budget of about \$3.8 million last year or at a cost of about \$303 per recovery bed. That is less than 1% of the cost of a single bed in incarceration or an employee dependent halfway house or treatment facility. This vast difference in taxpayer cost is because of the self-support feature of Oxford House and the fact that each house is a rented ordinary single-family house in a good neighborhood. The residents themselves pay the operational costs. Currently, Oxford House residents will pay landlords approximately \$23 million or about \$1,800 per recovery bed per year. Total household expenses (rent to the landlord, utility bills, and staples) currently exceed \$65 million or \$5,200 per bed.

Another sign of our national inefficiency in dealing with alcoholism and drug addiction is the extent of incarceration. The latest figures I have seen report 2.1 million incarcerated. Between 60 and 80% of those incarcerated have a serious alcohol and/or other drug addiction. Each year, about 650,000 are released from jail or prison but most return within a short period of time.

Most of the 650,000 moving from incarceration back into civil society go back to their old neighborhoods. About the only person who welcomes them home is their old drug dealer – and he will only give “free samples” of his or her product for a very limited period of time. Soon the afflicted addict is back to crime to raise money to satisfy his or her addiction. This is why recidivism in the first year out of prison is over 50%. It doesn’t have to be this way. Over 70% of Oxford House residents have done jail time but most will become comfortable enough in sobriety to avoid relapse and will not have to cycle back to prison or primary treatment. In several states, Oxford House has been very successful in helping those getting out of jail or prison to get into an Oxford House and avoid the temptations of their old stomping ground. We need to do more in this area because when ex-offenders are given the support of living in an Oxford House with a diverse group of residents, they are better able to develop lasting sober and lawful behavior.

For the last 14 years, residents and alumni of Oxford House have gathered for an annual convention to share their strength, experience, and hope. Annually, the group alternates between convening in Washington, DC and elsewhere in the country. In September 2012, the 14th annual convention was held in Oklahoma City. Its theme was: “Oxford House: Good Neighbors – Good Citizens” and its purpose was to keep the Oxford House residents and alumni focused on the primary goal of providing enough recovery beds to make a significant difference for the nation as it struggles with government financial shortfall and for the individuals in need of long-term recovery. As more than 700 participants left Oklahoma City, they were all committed to bringing the good news about recovery and Oxford House living back to their peers and their communities at large.

My vision for the future is that the Oxford House program will expand exponentially to meet the very serious need that exists. My vision is not one motivated by profit. It is not one motivated by a thirst for power. It is motivated by a desire to put in place a practical, cost effective way to realistically lower health care costs, ensure safer communities, and open a proven path to long-term recovery for countless alcoholics, drug addicts, and those citizens with co-occurring mental illness. Oxford House, Inc. can train, manage, and supervise scores of outreach workers. The cost is minimal and the benefits are substantial and Oxford House has the infrastructure to make the vision a reality. Oxford House has proven through long experience and documented recovery outcome research that relapse does not have to be part of the recovery process. In short, Oxford House works.

Bill White: Do you think in the future that Oxford House will increasingly be seen as an alternative as well as an adjunct to treatment?

Paul Molloy: Well, I think it already is. People who are too poor to go to treatment now and have only detox often apply to an Oxford House. And the truth of the matter is that if you are just out of detox and get into an Oxford House, you've got a good chance of staying clean and sober.

Overall, our recovery outcome results speak for themselves. We have a really robust success rate despite the fact that Oxford House residents represent a broad segment of the population. Some residents are “has-beens” while others are “never weres.” Many have served time in jails or prisons and many have been homeless and lived on the streets. Oxford House works for people across a broad demographic spectrum. If I were a treatment provider and took a look at the research that has been done, I would integrate Oxford House as part of my continuing care program.

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